

MASS. EA32.2: N22/2



Massachusetts Natural Heritage Program

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OCT 3 - 1988

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Natural Community Work of

The Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

Natural Communities are groups of native plants and animals that naturally occur together. Community-types are defined by recurrent groupings of species that share particular environmental requirements. Community classification reflects relationships among the vegetation, topography, moisture, soils, and geology of sites. The goal of Natural Community classification and inventory is the protection of exemplary natural communities which protects species in their habitats, and gives the best chance of maintaining the species diversity of Massachusetts.

Classification:

A classification of the Natural Communities of Massachusetts divides the state's natural vegetation into approximately 120 community-types. These range from the widespread oak forests (Southern New England Dry Central Hardwood Forest) of central and eastern Massachusetts to the rarer calcareous fen wetlands (Southern New England Calcareous Basin Fen) of Berkshire County and the Coastal Plain Pondshore Community (New England Coastal Plain Pondshore Community) of Plymouth and Barnstable Counties.

Data:

Location and status of exemplary occurrences of the state's rarest Natural Communities are maintained in the Natural Heritage Program's data base. About 20 of these community-types are considered rare and are inventoried, surveyed, and monitored to protect them and their constituent species. These include:

Floodplain Forest
Sandplain Grassland/Coastal Heathland
Coastal Plain Ponds
Freshwater Tidal Marsh

Rich Mesic Forest
Pitch Pine/Scrub Oak Barren
Calcareous Fen
Brackish Tidal Marsh

Management:

Management techniques to maintain the successional status of certain exemplary communities are being investigated by Natural Heritage staff in conjunction with The Nature Conservancy and through a Small Research Contract program. For example, prescribed burns are keeping shrubs and trees out of the grasslands on Katama Plain in Edgartown, effects of burning vs. shrub removal by cutting to perpetuate pine barrens in Plymouth is being examined, and rates of woody invasion in a calcareous fen in Sheffield are being monitored.

For further information on the Program
or to provide information on Natural Communities
Contact

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March 1988

